

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today...

I am Susan Grettenberger and I am speaking in opposition to House bills 4188, 4189, and 4190.

I am a licensed social worker, a professor and the director of the social work program at Central Michigan University, and the Vice President of Social Policy for the National Association of Social Workers, Michigan Chapter (NASW- Michigan). Today, I am speaking on behalf of NASW-Michigan.

House bills 4188, 4189, and 4190 violate professional requirements of social workers who work in the types of agencies covered under these bills and have the potential to harm children, children who rely on the services of unbiased and objective social workers. It would allow an organization to legally refuse to serve people based on the philosophy of religious values, regardless of the harm done to children in their care.

The profession of social work, including our state licensure, is grounded in non-discrimination. Social workers enter the profession with the understanding that ethical obligations to serve all clients supercede personal beliefs or preferences. Social workers in agencies choosing to discriminate under the proposed legislation will be required to violate social work values and ethical standards, placing themselves in a position of risking their licensure.

We cannot simply all work elsewhere. Social workers are specifically trained in the skills of competent, effective child welfare work. While we have considerable respect for our colleagues in other professions, if social workers refuse to work at faith-based agencies, the quality of care available to children in foster care and eligible for adoption could be compromised, or there simply will not be enough workers available.

Proponents of this legislation focus on how it might affect prospective adoptive parents, and suggest they go to another agency that will complete their adoptions. Make no mistake. Discrimination against someone because they don't fit with an agency's values is a problem. But equally if not more importantly, this is about the children needing a forever home who do not have the option of going to another agency to find a new family.

Already removed from the family they knew, now their options for adoption are limited as well. When the only private agency and perhaps the only agency offering foster care for children in areas such as northern Michigan may be faith-based, what will happen if those agencies are allowed to turn away parents who would offer the good homes the children in their care need? Limiting the available families in any area is bad for the children who need them.

This legislation is clearly intended to allow faith-based adoption agencies to refuse to work with gay and lesbian parents. Special needs children, older children of color, and sibling groups are difficult to place. Older special needs children of color who are in a sibling group can be nearly impossible to place in a foster home or later, an adoptive home. Yet many gay and lesbians have done just that, starting as foster parents.

I know many such parents, some of whom have as many as six or seven adopted kids. I happen to be one of them, with four adopted children.

I am a social worker who happens to be a gay adoptive parent. I am also an active Christian, raised by a minister and a teacher. I cannot imagine using my identity as a Christian or as a gay person to discriminate, to refuse services to someone who violated my religious beliefs. This is both professional and personal for me. Discrimination against people violates social work professional ethical standards, Christian values of tolerance and my human recognition that people cannot be measured by one dimension of their identity.

We could talk about many things: the professional impact, the economic impact, (some estimates are millions more in state costs for child welfare), the discrimination against potential parents.... But what we really should talk about is the children, because they are what is most important. These bills will harm children, even though that was not the intention. They would make it harder for children, who are already hurt, and in need a loving, supportive home, to get that home, because they don't get to pick what agency works with them.

Thank you for your time.